

## INTRODUCTION

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# The aims and academic status of industrial archaeology

There seems to be fairly general agreement that the term ‘industrial archaeology’ was invented early in the 1950s by Donald Dudley, at that time Director of the Extra-Mural Department of the University of Birmingham, and afterwards Professor of Latin within the same university. Mr Dudley, however, made no claim to be an industrial archaeologist, and did no more than suggest that the academic and practical possibilities of something called industrial archaeology might be worth exploring. The subject’s first real impresario was one of Mr Dudley’s extra-mural colleagues, Michael Rix, who in 1955 wrote an article for *The Amateur Historian* which gave industrial archaeology, both as a name and as a range of study, to the world. Mr Rix, very wisely, made no attempt to define the subject, but made it clear that the material in which he was primarily interested belonged to the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the factories and mills, ‘the steam-engines and locomotives that made possible the provision of power, the first metal-framed buildings, cast-iron aqueducts and bridges, the pioneering attempts at railways, locks and canals’. These, he felt, ‘represent a fascinating interlocking field of study, whole tracts of which are virtually unexplored’.

Two comments could, with hindsight, be usefully made about Michael Rix’s pioneering article. The first is that he made no attempt to suggest what form this ‘fascinating interlocking field of study’ should take, and the second that he assumed, rightly or wrongly, that industrial archaeology would necessarily be confined to what could be termed, in British circumstances, the period of the Industrial Revolution. Most of the controversy which has surrounded industrial archaeology since the publication of this pioneering article has centred on these two points.

In writing the first book to appear on the subject,<sup>1</sup> I myself refused to accept that industrial archaeology was necessarily and by definition concerned exclusively with the monuments of the Industrial Revolution.

Everything has its birth and its old age and each industry has to be seen and studied against its own time-scale. In the case of the petroleum industry, for instance, the old and rare monuments date from the second half of the 19th

<sup>1</sup> *Industrial Archaeology: an Introduction* John Baker, 1963.

century. For atomic energy and for a number of plastics and synthetic fibres it is the 1940s that we have to consider. For iron bridges it is the middle of the 18th century. It is pointless and ridiculous to try to establish an arbitrary date which can be used to divide the old from the recent, the archaeologically approved from the archaeologically disreputable.

I went on to attempt a definition which I felt would not be unreasonably restricting to people who might feel drawn towards this new field of research: 'Industrial archaeology is the discovery, recording and study of the physical remains of yesterday's industries and communications.' This seemed to me then, and still does now, to say everything that needs to be said in the way of a definition, although subsequent experience suggests that it might have been wise to emphasise the word 'remains' and to use it frequently in one's writings, as a reminder of the essentially archaeological character of the work one was doing.

I certainly thought it advisable at that time, sniffing object-worshippers down wind, to give all possible support to the humanity and good sense of the founder and first editor of *Antiquity*, O. G. S. Crawford. 'Archaeology', he once wrote, 'is merely the past tense of anthropology. It is concerned with past phases of human culture.' I agreed completely with Crawford's insistence that the basis of culture is technology and I tried to make my position clear by saying that 'a good archaeologist must be interested in every aspect of the culture he has chosen to study – its technology, its social organisation, its political system. Otherwise, he cannot interpret what he finds, he cannot talk sense.'

In the third and extensively revised edition of the same work,<sup>2</sup> published thirteen years later, I suggested that industrial archaeology in Britain had passed through two stages of development and redefinition and was entering a third. Stage 1, I believed, had ended in about 1960. It had been characterised, I felt, by a notable crusading spirit. 'A small and curiously assorted body of pioneers devoted a great deal of time and energy to stirring up the public conscience about the rapid disappearance of buildings and machinery which document the history of British industry and technology, especially in the 19th century.' Some of these pioneers were undoubtedly sentimentalists and some had little knowledge of the workings of either industry or politics, but they believed in what they said and they performed an invaluable service in making the phrase 'industrial archaeology' known. Stage 2, which covered the Sixties and early Seventies, had three notable features – 'the creation all over Britain of amateur groups pursuing industrial archaeology as a hobby, the beginnings of a rudimentary National

<sup>2</sup> *Industrial Archaeology: a New Introduction* John Baker, 1976.

Register of Industrial Monuments, and the belated growth of academic interest in the subject', Stage 2 had passed into Stage 3 'at the moment when an increasing number of people begin to take stock of what has been achieved during Stage 1 and Stage 2 and to ask what it all means'. The bits and pieces, I felt, 'must add up to something they must contribute to the understanding of a wider field'. Industrial archaeology had entered into an inevitable period of heartsearching and quarrels. The honeymoon was over.

What began in 1963 as *The Journal of Industrial Archaeology* and ended ten years later as *Industrial Archaeology* was appropriate to industrial archaeology in Stages 1 and 2. This quarterly publication belonged to the subject in what might perhaps be called its describing years, when industrial archaeology still had a novelty value and when its practitioners were devoting themselves fairly wholeheartedly to amassing objects and facts, with little energy or inclination for philosophy. Neither the *Journal* nor *Industrial Archaeology* had much time for the cultural aspects of the subject. They reflected the point of view of people who felt that their work was urgent, because destruction was going on all around them and as much as possible had to be found, recorded and saved before the bonfires, the bulldozers and the scrap-metal merchants swept the remains of the Industrial Revolution out of existence. The psychology was not unlike that of a nation at war: 'We must win the war first and we can argue afterwards as to why it was worth fighting and what we ought to do after peace has arrived.'

When the successor to *Industrial Archaeology*, *Industrial Archaeology Review*, began its career in the autumn of 1976, it was vigorously attacked in a *Times Literary Supplement* review by Philip Riden (14 January 1977). His main reason for thinking little of the new venture was that it reflected what he called 'antiquarianism', that is, the pleasures of the collector, rather than the pleasures of the scholar. Industrial archaeology was, he felt, a shapeless heap, piece piled upon piece without discipline or pattern, a typical and valuable Stage 3 statement and one which quite a number of people might feel inclined to echo. In the course of an illuminating and not always good-tempered exchange of letters which went on for several weeks, Mr Riden was answered by, among others, Dr R. A. Buchanan, who struck a more hopeful note than the review which gave rise to the correspondence.

Industrial archaeology has suffered to some extent from the fact that much of its material can be and has been used by neighbouring disciplines – economic and technological history, post-medieval archaeology, vernacular architecture and so on – in supporting hypotheses and in illustrating generalisations. But industrial archaeology is beginning to perform this more

synthetical role for itself, and forthcoming issues of the *Review* will reflect this development of the subject.  
 (28 January 1977)

There are those who would consider such a statement over-optimistic. What it implies is, first, that industrial archaeology has accumulated a body of knowledge which constitutes at least the core of a subject or discipline; second, that it has developed, or is developing, certain methods of approach, rules of procedure, which are special to itself, and which are understood and followed by its practitioners; and, third, that, with its factual and methodological base secure, it is in a position to encourage outward thinking, that is, exploration of the links between industrial artifacts and the broader cultural development of society. What this might mean has been well described by one of Britain's foremost industrial archaeologists, Neil Cossons, the Director of the Ironbridge Gorge Museum Trust.

After insisting that it is essential, 'in reaching our own definition of the subject not to resort to excessive pontification or the setting of strict and rigid boundaries around something which is so new, so dynamic in character and in such a fluid stage of development'.<sup>3</sup> Mr Cossons goes on to express his own belief that 'industrial archaeology will define its own boundaries, techniques and disciplines, given time',<sup>4</sup> and then explains how he sees the vital matter of outward, contextual thinking.

He considers that the period of the Industrial Revolution 'provides the core area, the mainspring of industrial archaeology', but, he continues,

there is a diffuse penumbra, too, into which the industrial archaeologist, like the archaeologist of any other period, must go to provide a perspective and context for his main area of interest. Industrial archaeology spreads out chronologically, in terms of subject area and in terms of technique well beyond its obvious centre – hence the need for flexible boundaries. Like any other archaeologist (or historian) the industrial archaeologist must have an understanding of the antecedents of his particular area of study. Thus the evolution of wind and water power in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries can only be fully appreciated in the context of much earlier developments. But to regard industrial archaeology as being concerned with only industrial activity within the last two centuries or so is also to reject the cultural definition. The industrial archaeologist, if he is to have any real

<sup>3</sup> *The BP Book of Industrial Archaeology*, David and Charles, 1975, p. 16.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.* p. 16.

understanding of the sites and artefacts of the Industrial Revolution, must look at the landscape in its entirety.<sup>5</sup> Industrial archaeology is in part a landscape study, and the industrial archaeologist cannot restrict himself wholly to the thematic approach. The Industrial Revolution created a new economy, a new landscape, a new way of life. In terms of the lives of all of us, as inhabitants of an industrial nation – the first industrial nation – it is the most relevant period of our past, not only because it is the most recent, but because the specific changes wrought during the last 2½ centuries provide the foundations of our present society and of all other industrial societies throughout the world.<sup>6</sup>

Mr Cossons believes that ‘this one word “relevance” provides the key to the widespread growth of interest in industrial archaeology in recent years’, and he is not referring, of course, only to Great Britain. The same consideration undoubtedly applies to all industrialised countries in some degree, although the time-span is rather longer in Britain than elsewhere and the quantity of available archaeological material is exceptionally large in relation to the area of the country.

Without disagreeing in the least with Mr Cossons’s line of reasoning, one may perhaps be allowed to suggest that the monuments of the Second and Third Industrial Revolutions – the revolutions based on oil in the first instance and on electronics in the second – are just as significant and just as much in need of recording and safeguarding as those of the First. The tower from which the first American astronaut was launched into space in 1962 has recently been demolished, on the grounds that it was ‘too expensive to maintain as an historical monument’, which, in such a wealthy society, is hardly convincing. If it was right to campaign to save the Euston Arch, one of the most impressive reminders of the early days of railways, it is equally right to protest at the destruction of the spacemen’s tower. In my view, not, alas, universally shared, the monuments of nineteenth century railways are no more and no less important than the monuments of twentieth century space-travel.

A second difficulty concerns a considerable proportion, possibly the majority, of the people who have been affected by what Mr Cossons has called ‘the widespread growth of interest in industrial archaeology in recent years’, the non-academics at the base of the industrial archaeology pyramid, the coolies who have carried out so many of the menial and

<sup>5</sup> Mr Cossons is a geographer by training and background, and the viewpoint which this provides is a valuable corrective to the purely historical and non-visual approach of so many industrial archaeologists.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.* pp. 16–17.

largely unpublicised tasks for the past twenty years. Industrial archaeology, like reading novels, is not simply an academic subject. It has become a matter of great and time-consuming importance to a wide range of people, from lorry drivers to architects and from plumbers to journalists. Industrial archaeology belongs to them just as much as it does to economic historians. They are very likely to become annoyed and rebellious at any suggestion that they should confine their interests to the survivals of the age of coal, iron, canals and railways. They are not preparing themselves to take examinations and not unnaturally want to make discoveries for themselves, not to be kept padding reverently round the same well-trodden pastures. With rare exceptions, these discoveries are now to be made in the places connected with the industries of the twentieth century, not of the nineteenth. The coolies may possibly be antiquarians, although it is difficult to be sure of this, but they expect to get pleasure and satisfaction from what they do in their spare time. If they fail to find this in one direction, they will certainly look in others.

The amateur–professional controversy has to be stated in plain terms. Has industrial archaeology reached the point at which it can afford to regard itself as a wholly professional affair, with no need of its unpaid enthusiasts? If it has, then bodies like the Society for Industrial Archaeology in America and the Association for Industrial Archaeology in Britain are hypocritical shams, ripe for early extinction. If it has not, then the needs and interests of the people who make up the bulk of the membership of these societies – not all the enthusiasts, of course, belong to societies – must be recognised and catered for. What is unpardonable and suicidal is any idea of a first and second level of membership, of officers and other ranks, a situation which is very close to being reached in Britain. The draft of the joint policy statement of the Association for Industrial Archaeology and the Council for British Archaeology, circulated among members of the AIA in Britain at the end of 1976, included a revealing and unfortunate sentence. ‘In the study of industrial archaeology,’ it said, ‘practice has preceded theory, and voluntary enthusiasm has outstripped institutional organisation.’ Was man made for the Sabbath, one is tempted to enquire, or the Sabbath for man? Are the spare-time industrial archaeologists to be reproached for their over-enthusiasm? Of course practice has preceded theory, if only for the reason that more people are interested in practice than in theory. The intellectual, the person whose life is dedicated to the objective analysis of facts, theories and attitudes, is a rare animal. But the sentence quoted above is singularly lacking in both grace and gratitude. Industrial archaeology may still be little more than a yard full of bricks from which nothing as recognisable as a house has yet been built, but a great many bricks have been made and carried there by

people inspired by ‘voluntary enthusiasm’ and by little else.

At this point it may be useful to mention the results of a brief questionnaire which I sent to eighteen of Britain’s most prominent archaeologists during the summer of 1976, people concerned with the prehistoric, Roman and medieval worlds. They were asked:

1. Do you take Industrial Archaeology seriously?
2. If the answer to (1) is ‘No’, what would have to be done about Industrial Archaeology in order to make it worthy of serious attention?
3. We have now had 15–20 years of widespread interest in Industrial Archaeology, in this country and elsewhere. Do you think this interest has achieved anything socially, educationally or academically helpful, and, if so, what?

Thirteen of the eighteen replied, an unexpectedly high proportion, and their views may come as a surprise to many people, both inside and outside industrial archaeology.

Of those who replied, eleven said they did take industrial archaeology seriously, and two said they did not. There were, however, certain reservations which are most effectively and fairly presented in the actual words used.

‘I admit to feeling that the title [industrial archaeology] is something of a misnomer in some cases, in that it often very properly employs historical rather than archaeological sources.’

‘Yes, except when industrial archaeologists start taking themselves too seriously.’

‘Yes. In theory archaeological field techniques could usefully be carried out on industrial sites, e.g. on sites inadequately documented.’

‘Not personally, except where it is related to ethnology, e.g. the study of modern mills in “backward” areas.’

‘Of course I take industrial archaeology seriously, as I take all aspects of archaeology. I think it was a slight mistake to call it industrial archaeology because it is only one aspect of the archaeology of the last 200/300 years, but it clearly made the public interested and this was a good way to do it.’

Three of the thirteen offered suggestions for improving the status of the subject:

‘It still seems to lack an academic background, i.e.



integration with modern history, and it still seems to be an “amateur” study, carried out by people who just like it (cf. railway and steam traction enthusiasts). The interest is wide, indeed wider than archaeology, but not to the *same people*, as it should be.’

‘There is no clear definition of “industrial archaeology” that distinguishes the subject as a discreet area of study, whilst serving as a useful umbrella term. I think that it is applied rather loosely to areas of study that are in my opinion more accurately described as history of technology, history of industry, local history, social history, etc. The “archaeology” part is now to my mind thoroughly misleading, and improperly defended.’

‘It is desperately in need of redefinition and reorganisation. I.A. stands where conventional archaeology stood 100 years ago – largely dilettante antiquarianism, lacking professional and academic standards. In particular, if they are to justify the title “archaeologists”, most I.A. enthusiasts, with a very few outstanding exceptions, must submit themselves to the disciplines of conventional archaeology.’

The archaeologists were inspired or provoked to write a good deal in answer to the third question. The achievement of industrial archaeology had, they felt, been remarkable in some ways, less impressive in others. Broadly speaking, it had done very well socially, moderately well educationally and poorly academically.

*Socially*: as an active or passive leisure pursuit; improving social awareness.

*Educationally*: availability of and contact with the real thing is inevitably a powerful educational tool.

*Academically*: as an interdisciplinary area and involving both technical and academic skills, it lacks the cohesiveness of a traditional subject area and therefore has had a slower impact. Useful contributions are being made, but the potential may be restrained by present academic structures and less easy to quantify. Like any “new” subject, it is still breaking the “dilettante barrier”.’

*Socially*: yes, people are more interested in recent things that they can understand, especially machinery and technology.

*Educationally*: yes, in making people aware of their environment.



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*Academically*: I'm more doubtful. It is particularly deplorable that in Birmingham of all places, I.A. is marginal in our modern history courses.'

'*Socially*: (no comment)

*Educationally*: it has already provided, in a number of areas which are lacking in interest national monuments of the traditional type, a nucleus of sites and buildings that can be visited by classes and groups and which provide a link with the immediate past of the community and are therefore readily understood.

*Academically*: it provides the background essential to a proper appreciation of the historical and social development of the country during the Industrial Revolution and, to a lesser extent, of the preceding ages.'

'*Socially*: appreciation of a wasting historical asset and heritage while there is still time to save a great deal.

*Educationally*: enjoyment and interest of life. There is enormous public interest and response.

*Academically*: the interest is largely local or, at best, national; not international.'

'*Socially, Educationally and Academically*. Many people who were born into and live in industrialised areas are becoming less inhibited about proclaiming that the area they live in and the industries associated with those areas do have a past, do have a "history" that people will be interested in, both in an academic and an entertainment/educative sense.

How much of this has to do with the industrial archaeology movement I am not sure. I think it has more to do with a loss of community identity; rapid changes in life-style, both personal and at work; television – nostalgia makes good television. I think this interest and awareness of our "industrial heritage" would have emerged in the last fifteen years whether it were called "industrial archaeology" or something else.

Whatever the process of evolution of the study has been, it has broken down some of the snob barriers between science and art, history and local history, etc., but there is still a long way to go before most schools and colleges really get to grips with the real concept of industrialisation and how it can be related to local studies and academic work at higher levels.'

*'Socially, Educationally, Academically* In the 1960s a lot of basic research and fieldwork was undertaken in Northern Ireland but for one reason or another it is only now that this is being written up. The resulting Stationery Office publication should have a considerable impact, particularly in the educational field, at all levels. The widespread interest in the subject should crystallise rapidly and with far-reaching results once the official publication sets the limits of the new field and brings it fully into public view.'

*'Socially, Educationally, Academically* I am sure it has done so. I would like to think that it has brought matters archaeological to a wider public than the often feverish devotees of everything earlier than 43 A.D. and nothing much later than 410 A.D.'

*'Socially, Educationally, Academically* Yes, in all these respects, but what is wanted, from my limited knowledge, is more field work – solid survey with excavations.'

*'Socially:* yes, greater awareness by amenity/preservationist groups, and to a lesser extent the general public of the importance of the industrial heritage.

*'Educationally:* marginally. I.A. is in some areas a useful basis for local history studies. However, in general, it is badly taught.

*'Academically:* hardly at all. Archaeology itself is only now coming to terms with its interdisciplinary nature, I.A. not at all. It is still ill-defined and subject to individual whims in its interpretation and application.'

*'Socially, Educationally and Academically* Viewed as an aspect of local history, I think the subject has proved of interest educationally. Divisive elements have tended to lessen the social and academic impact of the subject.'

If one reflects on these comments, two main lines of thought are apparent. The first is a general belief that industrial archaeology, however well or badly practised, has done a great deal to increase public interest in that aspect of history which is referred to as 'our industrial heritage', or 'our industrial past'. The second is that nobody really knows where to place industrial archaeology academically. The chief reason for this bewilderment and suspicion, it may be suggested, is that the wrong criteria are being applied, or, as one of our respondents more delicately put it, 'the potential may be restrained by present academic structures and less easy to quantify'.